

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE BRIEFER: COLONEL JON LEHR, COMMANDER, 4TH STRYKER BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM, 2ND INFANTRY DIVISION, MULTINATIONAL DIVISION-NORTH SUBJECT: CURRENT OPERATIONS IN DIYALA PROVINCE MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 11:11 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, MARCH 26, 2008

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MR. HOLT: All right, Colonel Lehr, are you with us?

COL. LEHR: I am. How are you hearing me?

MR. HOLT: All right. We've got you loud and clear here, sir. Thank you very much, Colonel Jon Lehr, commander, 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, Multinational Division-North, with us today for the Bloggers Roundtable. Thank you, sir.

And the floor is yours. Do you have an opening statement for us?

COL. LEHR: Yeah, I've got a couple of points that'll probably assist in stimulating discussion and some questions. First, I'd like to talk about progress in Diyala Province. And I'm talking in regards to three what we would refer to as lines of operations -- security, the transition of Iraqi security forces, and then, last but not least, the governance line of operation. I'll try to be as descriptive as possible, so I'll paint a word picture, and then maybe that will stimulate further discussion.

First, security. I would rate the security situation across the province, taking everything into consideration, amber, in a scale of red-amber-green. For example, I considered amber, which is pretty good considering what the province has been through over the past year, a sound bite; 70 percent drop of significant activities over the past eight months.

Transition, transitioning Iraqi Security Forces to the lead, I would suggest that that's somewhere in a blended color between amber- red. The army has made vast improvements since last summer, vast improvements, and are capable of conducting unilateral operations with some assistance from us in terms of what we would refer to as enablers -- artillery, attack aviation, close air support, et cetera -- capable of conducting unilateral operations.

IP, a bit more challenging. One, we do not have the numbers that are required across the province, and then there's a problem with the training level, or, as we like to refer to it as the professionalization of the force. And we're working through that right now. And I would suggest that that is what gives it the tint of red in my assessment.

Governance line of operation. I considered amber. The government, if we walked away right now, the government of Diyala, the provincial government, could function. But the capacity is not there, at least looking through a set of western lenses. The capacity or the subject matter, expertise to govern, is not quite there. However, like I said, if we walk away, it would function.

I think the main problems right now all tie to the legislative and executive branch or the provincial council and the ministries at the provincial level, those subject-matter expertise. And we're in a process of developing, through the provincial reconstruction teams that we have, working with the brigade, capacity, the capacity to govern, both legislate and also run the functions and the infrastructure within the province, which is the duties of the ministries.

From an enemy perspective, I would say the current weapon of choice is starting to shift a little bit from IED to the suicide vest. Now, let me explain a little more. I'm not suggesting that there's not IEDs out there. There are. But our proficiency level of finding and clearing them, both the Iraqi army, Iraqi police and coalition forces, is mitigating the risk that was once associated with the IED. And I think we're starting to see a shift to the suicide vest. And I can comment on that a little bit more if you all are curious; two main reasons. I suggested -- well, actually three main reasons. One I've already suggested -- the proficiency level. Second, the introduction of the mine-resistant armored personnel carrier, the MRAP, I think, is causing the battlefield to change a bit. I have seen the MRAP take some significant shots with several hundred pounds of homemade explosives and soldiers coming out of the back end able to walk away.

And on the second, I believe al Qaeda in Diyala Province is on the ropes. Everything that we hear and read with our sources are telling us they're very scared right now and confused on what's going on with the combination of Iraqi Security Force operations, coalition force presence, and the awakening that's taking place across Diyala Province.

And then finally, the brigade's approach remains the same. I think I might have talked to some of you six, eight months ago when we were in a different area. We were in the northern belt of Baghdad at the consulate in western Diyala, Salahuddin and Baghdad Province, near Taji-Tarmia area. We used the same approach and brought it this way.

We've exported it over here to Diyala, and that is focusing on three tenets -- erosion, disintegration and separation; erosion of the enemy's resources, the ability for him to resource the fight -- that's money, weapons, ammunition, disintegrating his capability.

We're focusing on the enemy's leadership, taking him, the leader, off the battlefield; and then finally both lethal and non-lethal approaches to separate the insurgent from their base of support, the population, driving a wedge between the insurgent and their base of support. They do a pretty good job, particularly al Qaeda, at separating themselves with their heavy-handed, brutal tactics. But we are able to facilitate that through some non-lethal things that we do within the brigade.

So, having said that as kind of an opening statement, I'd like to turn it over to you all for some questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you very much, sir.

Richard, you were first on line. Why don't you get us started?

Q Good evening, sir. I'm with opfor.com, Richard Lowry.

Can you tell me if the current situation with Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army, with him rearing his ugly head, is affecting your operations in Diyala?

COL. LEHR: That's a great question, Richard. I just came from several engagements. I see what's going on in the larger picture, and I won't comment outside of this province about what's going on. But I read the news, or I'm hearing the news. And this ties to your question. Let me walk the dog a little bit here.

I'm concerned about some of the same violence and extremism migrating to Diyala Province. And one of my missions today was to talk to some of my key Shi'a -- we call them (Ciz Vin ?) points -- I'm sure you've heard that term before -- the people that I engage with at my level. And we talked about it. And they were also concerned to a certain degree about that migrating northward into Diyala Province.

We think it'll manifest itself as more of a civil disobedience. I don't think the Shi'a extremists have quite as strong a base of support or support zone in the Diyala provinces. Obviously they do further south. That's just my assessment and knowing what I know about this area.

We are prepared for some splinter groups.

We call them JAM special groups, the ones that are influenced by possibly the Iranian Revolutionary Guard corps, the Qods Force guys, or just have split off of Sadr's path. We are preparing ourselves for some attacks, possible attacks, but haven't seen anything yet.

So the bottom line, talking to the people that I talk to, that I value their opinion and take their counsel, the Shi'a-Sunni leadership in the province, they believe it's going to manifest itself as civil disobedience and they don't expect to see a whole lot of violence particularly focused on coalition forces. There may be some political infighting within the Shi'a community, but they don't expect to see a whole lot directed at coalition forces. And we hope it stays that way.

MR. HOLT: Okay, FBL.

Q Oh, you got to me so quick, I wasn't quite ready.

What are the biggest trouble areas or troublemakers in your area right now? Is it al Qaeda militias, general anti-American insurgent forces? What's the biggest challenge?

COL. LEHR: Another great question. I think we are guarding against -- let me use an expression. We are guarding against becoming victims of our own success. We're running al Qaeda off. I suggested that or alluded to it earlier in my opening statement. I'm not saying they're gone. They're still out there, and there's, you know, an element of danger associated with al Qaeda. But we think we've got them on the ropes.

As we do that, I am concerned about Shi'a extremism creeping in to the province and expanding, kind of like following -- the feeding fish following the shark as the shark moves through the water. We're a little concerned about that.

And again, not only today, but for the last several weeks, that has been my stump speech to all the people that I talk to on a daily, weekly, bi-weekly basis about stopping this. We can't allow this to happen. We can't -- which leads to sectarian violence, which leads to -- guess what? We've created the conditions for the Sunnis to bring insurgents back in or allow it happen -- either overtly or complicitly. So right now my biggest concern, I think my greatest threat, is sectarian violence that could creep back in. (Background noise) -- in mass scale right now, but I am worried about it a little bit as we clean out -- or as the Iraqis say: cleanse the area of al Qaeda.

I hope that answered your question.

Q Yes.

If I could ask a quick follow-up: Has -- with that concern over there, have you seen any changes in the last week or two in number or lethality of attacks?

COL. LEHR: I can answer that a couple ways. I'll ask you a question: Are you talking about directed at coalition forces or directed elsewhere?

Q Well, directed at coalition, if that includes ISF.

COL. LEHR: Okay. Against, Americans -- no, I'll say against Americans and Iraqis the general trend is downward. I just talked to my boss last night. I send him sitreps about every two, three days -- written sitrep -- and I've noticed for the last seven to 10 days the level of significant activities is how I kind of measure security situation, both short term and long term -- the analysis of that. It has been well below -- well below a historical norm for the last seven or 10 days.

I just came in out of the field and I was asked for a sitrep as I'm returning into the forward-operation base. And today, so far, across the entire Diyala province, the size of Maryland, we've had two significant activities -- two events that qualified as significant activities. One was a found IED and the other was a cache turned over to us.

So to answer your question: No, I have not seen an increase in the amount of attacks. Maybe I'm just being a little overly nervous. Again, trying to avoid being a victim of our own success, so I'm really kind of keyed up on trying to stop anything else from arising.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

David.

Q Hi. It's David Axe with War Is Boring.

So sir, could you orient us to the status of your Sons of Iraq groups in your area? And then I want to follow that up with another question. In

other words, how many have you got? What are the trends? COL. LEHR: Yeah. A good question -- another very relevant question, particularly for Iraq right now.

I'll start by saying the Sons of Iraq or CLCs are not a permanent security solution; however, with that said, they have been an integral part of our strategy. You heard me mentioning earlier separating the insurgent from the base of support. Well, this was paramount to that tenant of the strategy -- getting people to standup and assume security of their own given area.

Now, with that said, not all CLCs are created equally -- not all Sons of Iraq are created equally. I've noticed and learned a lot. It's really interesting seeing this thing grow from the ground floor.

They've split themselves into two -- naturally split themselves into two bins, so to speak. One is a tribally based Sons of Iraq. They tend to be associated with rural areas. A tribal system is always more -- is always stronger in the rural area. The political situation is usually more relevant and pertinent in urban areas -- so the other half of the CLC equation is the politically based ones. And that's what we're finding in Iraq -- I'm sorry, in Baqubah.

There were originally four main groups -- political groups that were supporting the CLCs in Baqubah. They were -- they are Hamas of Iraq, Salah Ad-din, Mujahadeen and 1920s Revolutionary Brigade. They have kind of loosely confederated themselves now into what is called -- they're referred to as the People's Committee. They are realizing the power of a political block and they are very -- the senior leaders, or the leaders of these groups, are politically motivated bottom line. They sense an election coming around within the province and they want to be part of the solution.

So they have confederated themselves so to speak. And the People's Committee consists of two general subgroups, for lack of better words: One is the political side and one the other kind of the military side that runs the Sons of Iraq or keeps accountability kind of operations type things.

So now, having set the stage there, there is the tribally based ones that are associated with tribal areas and villages that are there to protect their villages. And then there are the groups that have fought in the liberation of Baqubah that have morphed into a political organization.

Over the -- being a political organization, they've realized the power of their voice now, particularly since they have formed this alliance within the four groups: The People's Committee. And about a month ago it was in the news for a while that there was a strike of CLCs or Sons of Iraq in Baqubah. And in my opinion, it got blown out of proportion. It was distorted. Yes, there was. They had some grievances that they wanted aired, but it wasn't -- there was not a widespread dip in security or anything like that, because again, they are only

a small portion of the security apparatus. They've got coalition forces, IP and IA in the area.

Within three days, most of them came back to work. The figures that I saw were in West Baqubah there was a couple dozen that went on strike. And in East Baqubah several hundred up to -- I heard a figure up to 1,000, but they were only on strike for about three days. And then guess what? They didn't pay them for them three days, so they learned a hard lesson because they were bucking the system and not adhering to the rules. We addressed their concerns and then they came back to work -- the bottom line.

So how would I assess overall how they have done? I think -- I have to give them credit. Again, and I go back to this approach that we've taken of separating insurgent from the base of support in the population. They helped us. They really have, so I have an allegiance to them -- particularly the ones in the rural areas that are linked to the tribes. And even the ones in Baqubah. They fought and spilled blood defending their areas and running al Qaeda out of Baqubah during Arrowhead Ripper last June a year ago -- well, June.

So I think they're not -- I always tell them, whenever I'm in an engagement with them, that they are not an end -- they're a means to an end. So what we're attempting to do right now is find employment for the men. A lot of them will be absorbed into the Iraqi security forces -- primarily the police, but some in the army. And then there's other initiatives that the governor's working within the province to try to get them hired on in various jobs. For example, force protection services that are associated with each ministry. They have guard forces in that -- kind of like "rent-a-police" back in the United States -- a job similar to that.

So that was a long-winded explanation.

I hope it addressed your question about CLCs or Sons of Iraq.

Q Yes, it did. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And David, do you have a follow-up on that?

Q No. Actually, I don't.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

All right: Marissa.

Q Hi, Colonel Lehr. Thank you so much. This is Marissa Cochrane from the Institute for the Study of War.

I'm wondering if you can comment on coalition force levels. Given the recent drawdowns over the last few months of forces in Diyala, how comfortable are you with the current levels? Are you seeing al Qaeda reinfiltration -- particularly in Balad Ruz, Turki Village? And just any other information you can offer on the current level of forces.

COL. LEHR: Yeah. I understand the question.

I think from the coalition's perspective, the level of coalition forces here in Diyala province is fine.

You know, I grew up in a school that said the formula -- the letter "P" -- "P" for plenty. It's kind of a joke we use in demolitions. P for plenty is the formula. I would always like more forces, but I think we're at a -- I honestly believe from a coalition force perspective, we're at an adequate level right now.

Where I do have concerns is the amount of Iraqi security forces -- particularly Iraqi army -- in the province. I personally -- and have voiced this opinion -- believe that we do not have an adequate number of Iraqi brigades operating under a 5th Iraqi Army division on Diyala. But that's not my decision. But that's my assessment. I have a -- personally believe that bringing another brigade online, which is the 4th Brigade of the 5th Division -- in my opinion, they need another brigade to do things right. Now with that said, is there a re-infiltration of al Qaeda into the province? No. I would say conversely we're running them out. You mentioned Turki Village? Yeah, I am seeing that myself. I believe they're getting pushed into that area and it's just a matter of time until the Iraqi Army clears them out of that area and we begin holding that ground. We're being methodical in approach. The temptation is to run all over the province and play Whack-a-Mole, but I disagree with that. I think we've got to be methodical and we've got to go through the process of clearing and holding, and I refer to it as tactical building. A build is a long-term process and we -- you know, that's being done, but clear and hold and tactical build and to give an area before you progress further on because if you clear it and leave it, they'll re-infiltrate as you suggest.

So Turki Village is on down the road and I'm getting on Arab news stations quite often, and saying, "Time is now. Lay down your arms. We're coming." And so we're approaching it that way, also, through the possible reconciliation. So I think -- to go back to your question, do we have adequate force levels from a coalition force perspective? Yes, I believe so in Diyala. From an Iraqi security force, I think we need more. And is al Qaeda re-infiltrating back in? No. The inverse of that -- I think we're running them out. Does that answer your question?

Q Yes. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Any follow-ups, real quick? All right --

Q I'd like --

MR. HOLT: -- go ahead.

Q I'd like to ask a follow-up, if I could, on what you said about the CLCs -- SOI. I was a little unclear there. I know there's a concern about SOI and other CLCs developing into a political militia, and I'm wondering if you're seeing that -- any concerns with that. And also with the names of the groups you mentioned that have formed into this committee, are you seeing foreign influence to -- that is negative?

COL. LEHR: I am -- I do see foreign influence, yes. At this point in time, I don't think it's negative, it's more politically motivated. But yes, it could easily become negative. And what I am concerned about and what you're

suggesting is a political insurgency -- a politically-based insurgency. I think the Iraqi government, particularly here in Diyala but with support of the national government, needs to pay attention to the situation. I do. And there is no cut-and-dry answers. This is complex and when you start sitting down and analyzing the connections between CLCs in this group to different places throughout Iraq in terms of their government, other outside influences -- foreign influences in that -- it is a fairly complex situation, and there is definitely a lot of political posturing for power in Iraq right now.

Now, what we're doing -- what I can do at my level is we've done a lot of good detective work. That's the bottom line. And we have culled a lot of the bad apples out of there. "You stepped out of line, you're going to get capped, you're going to get detained." And we have detained dozens of bad or rogue CLCs and that many or more infiltrators -- al Qaeda infiltrators -- into the program. So again, a lot of good detective work by the folks that work for me -- the great folks that work for me. And I bet since November, we've probably taken -- my guess is 60 to 80 high-value targets out of the program, just focusing on getting the bad apples out of there with good detective work.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q Okay. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay? All right. Thank you very much.

And thank you, Colonel Lehr, for joining us here for the Bloggers' Roundtable this morning.

Colonel Jon Lehr, Commander of 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division and Multi-Division or -- correction, Multi-National Division-North. Thank you, sir, and we look forward to speaking with you again.

COL. LEHR: All right. Well, it's my pleasure. You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Q Thank you.

Q Thanks Colonel.

END.